

Marsha Barbour Community Resource Center
6815 Kiln-Delisle Road
Pass Christian, MS 39571
Grand opening and dedication – Saturday, August 29, 2008; 2 p.m.
On-site contact – Mindy Pizzetta, Executive Director; [REDACTED]

Points:

Hurricane Katrina wiped out the Mississippi Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005.

All of the youth recreation facilities were destroyed, along with more than 50,000 homes; most public buildings and private businesses; and most of the infrastructure.

Pass Christian was especially hard hit by the storm, which is described as the worst natural disaster in American history.

Marsha Barbour, Mississippi's First Lady, was among the first on the scene in Pass Christian in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

Construction of a new community resource center in her honor was deemed a priority by local people. The partnership includes the Mississippi Department of Human Services and the Mississippi Hurricane Recovery Fund, along with many, many others.

Mrs. Barbour credits volunteers and private donors with the "Can Do" and "Will Do" attitudes that resulted in the center being built, especially Ellen Ratner and Cholene Espinoza.

Various components of the resource center have opened over the past year or so.

Today, the center's total enrollment amounts to more than 3,300 people taking part in youth sports, adult sports, summer specialty camps, swimming – including swimming for exercise, learning how to swim and lifeguard training – and other activities.

The center features:

The YMCA Starfish Aquatic Facility
The Milton and Roslyn Wolf Health Center
The Sam and Mary Haskell KaBOOM! Playground
The NBACares Basketball Court

This center is becoming an important life-link for area young people, as it has hosted the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Gulf Coast, YMCA Summer Day Camps, the Hancock High Swim Team, Pass Christian High School Basketball Team, Mt. Zion United Methodist Church Vacation Bible School, and the YMCA Adolescent Offenders Program.

In short, it is putting the word “community” back in the vocabulary of people in an area ravaged by the hurricane, by giving young people a safe place to play and learn.

Today, we’re doing the official grand opening and dedication of all of the elements within the Marsha Barbour Resource Center.

The best source of background is the following speech by Marsha Barbour when the resource center was dedicated on May 10, 2007:

Marsha Barbour's Speech to Attendees of the Resource Center
Dedication
May 10, 2007

You know, I am not accustomed to anything like this. I asked Haley if they got the right Barbour when I first heard about it. Nobody has ever named anything after me. I can’t even begin to explain how honored and deeply touched I am. Having the Marsha Barbour Community Resource Center means so much to me for many reasons.

First of all, what a coincidence that Pass Christian, the wonderful little community that happened to take such a beating from Katrina, shares some history with my ancestor Christián Ladner. My paternal grandmother was Louisa Ladner, a descendent of Christian.

But the history of this story is not a couple of centuries old; it is less than a couple of years old. Being here today brings back powerful memories of the days and weeks after Katrina.

It’s like a flashback seeing what happened in Greensburg, Kansas last weekend; that community was wiped out. Little do people understand that three of our coastal counties were wiped out just like that one community.

Our devastation was not seen on television because you were all in rescue and survival mode. There was no power and people could barely get from one point to the other.

It was a challenge that first night coming from Hattiesburg to the Coast in the eye of the storm. God led us here that night and through his will the first responders and I made it safely. It was overwhelming to comprehend all the things that were needed to help people survive. The courage you had and still do has renewed my faith in mankind.

You see, I got to witness firsthand the best in humanity. Your grace and unselfishness have been a wonderful inspiration to Haley and me. It is the reason that so many wonderful volunteers have poured in here to assist us. You have made a powerful statement through your heroic actions, and the world has noticed!

Haley might have done well on TV, but he got his strength and guidance from you. Ya'll know how difficult it was in the beginning to see any TV. Radio, word of mouth, and really just neighbor helping neighbor was the greatest source of help. I'm so glad that I was here seeing and hearing things daily to get them back to Haley and his team. I am grateful to him and am very proud of you.

I know you have persevered and suffered many losses, but your spirit is still strong. People talk a lot about resilience, courage, character... but these are just words. I used to do that too, but I learned what those words truly mean from my firsthand experiences with you. Although the words faith and hope haven't been used so much, I know they have been the driving force that has kept you going.

The outpouring of charity from other Mississippians and all the hundreds of thousands of volunteers is empowering. We have, my friends, endured the worst natural disaster in American history. The Coast is where it is today because of you and the assistance from thousands of volunteers that still help us.

The federal government has given Mississippi unprecedented latitude in deciding how best to spend the appropriated funds. They have worked with Mississippi to do it Mississippi's way—not necessarily the way Washington normally does things. The federal monies play a huge part in our recovery.

Haley always mentions the tremendous aid our sister states sent us. I saw Florida Law Enforcement many times along with many EMAC Teams. So many of the individuals on the EMAC Teams from all across the country did their 2 weeks...and then guess what...they were back down here volunteering on their comp. time!

All of these things are symbolic of the great outpouring of giving that Americans show in a time of need. We are all here for one another.

Because of “Can Do” and “Will Do” attitudes, it’s been inspiring to witness this community center become the product of the volunteers and the many private donors behind it.

But I have to mention the two women responsible for its coming into existence and who personify volunteerism and philanthropic causes: Ellen Ratner and Cholene Espinoza.

I met them for the first time at the correspondents’ dinner a couple of weeks ago in DC. These two women came here to help during a serious time of need. It was not to support family and friends; they came to help their fellow man. They never wavered from their support of you—the people of Pass Christian and DeLisle. What a tribute to their tenacity!

I can say now that these two women consider all of you family.

Y’all might want to know that Ellen is Jewish and a Democrat. This proves Katrina was a nonpartisan storm! We were and still are, all on the same playing field. We are in this together and I really feel in my heart that the Coast is COMING back better and stronger than ever.

There is a saying that some things are put in our life to change us, but they change us for the better.

I am very honored to be a part of a center that will address the needs of the community. It will offer school programs, counseling, sports, and arts. It’s something that will be meaningful and enriching for all of you.

The icing on the cake is that this place will be an emergency shelter.

Today we are breaking ground for the swimming pool. Ellen and Cholene, we had so many people that did a lot of swimming during Katrina. They now can do it as a planned activity!

I want to share with you an anonymous quote that I think speaks volumes about what we have been through. “Our lives are not determined by what happens to us but by how we react to what happens, not by what life brings to us, but by the attitude we bring to life. A positive attitude causes a chain reaction of positive thoughts, events, and outcomes. It is a catalyst, a spark that creates extraordinary results.”

I want this community center to cause a spark in the lives of everyone who comes through the doors.

I am especially honored to be here today to break ground. I do this in honor of Haley's mother who passed away today in 1973. I know she is looking down on us smiling but also being so proud of Haley and the commitment he has in making Mississippi better and stronger. I do this in her honor and in honor of all mothers. I wish you all a Happy Mother's Day whether you are a mother or not; we all have someone in our life that we look up too.

Most of all, I am genuinely honored and touched to be a part of this. I want you to know that the Marsha Barbour Community Resource Center is dedicated to you, the survivors, the volunteers, and the many people who have made today possible. From the bottom of my heart, thank you all.